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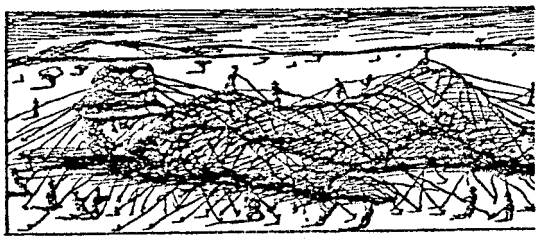
Strengthening the CIA

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This is a troubled world. Threatening forces continue to challenge us. For this reason, we must have a reliable intelligence service—the President's eyes and ears. Yet we are seeing and hearing dimly because of the present condition of the Central Intelligence Agency. In the past, the agency engaged in some practices that were not acceptable in America, but those days are behind us. The CIA has reformed; now we must stop punishing it. We must remove some of the constraints that keep it from doing its job. We must restore the confidence of its members and treat them as honorable men in an often perilous profession. A great power like America cannot survive without a great intelligence service.



Jimmy Carter may never make a speech like this, but he should. A combination of events has seriously disabled the CIA at a time when its services are needed more urgently than ever. To guide its foreign policy, to help its friends and restrain its foes, the U.S. must have adequate intelligence from those areas of the world where information is suppressed, confused or conflicting. The nation cannot afford to be caught off guard by sudden hostilities in the festering arc of crisis or in the vast arenas of Asia where Communist giants collide. With weapons technology advancing more rapidly than ever, the U.S. must keep abreast of the latest Soviet developments, since an undetected Russian breakthrough could jeopardize the ever fragile balance of power. In a world of turmoil, frequently erupting in anarchy, the U.S. must be able to exercise its influence to maintain stability. Where the U.S. fails to do so, some authoritarian power can be counted on to fill the void. That, for better or worse, is the way things are.

Today the CIA is not equipped for its role because it continues to operate under a debilitating cloud of suspicion. Until the early 1970s, its mission was pretty much taken for granted and its methods were seldom questioned. Then a series of revelations deluged it with hostile publicity for the first time. The agency was implicated in assassination attempts on foreign leaders—only a very few, but a few too many. Other abuses were also uncovered by a press seemingly ravenous for CIA misdeeds; inevitably there were gross exaggerations.

A punitive attitude toward the agency lingers on when there is no longer any real justification for it. The White House seems determined to keep reminding the agency of its past transgressions. Vice President Walter Mondale, in particular, has been the moralistic champion of a highly restrictive charter to govern U.S. intelligence agencies, though the legislation will probably be much modified before it is approved by Congress. CIA Director Admiral Stansfield Turner has responded energetically to a set of problems that did not confront his predecessors, but widespread Washington opinion holds that he is not the right man for the job. He may bring too rigid an outlook to what is, after all, an art form: the collection of educated guesses from incisive minds. Though the reduction of budget and personnel began before he took office, his critics charge that hundreds of senior officials with experience, dedication and language skills have been forced out. Turner feels that new blood is needed, but younger recruits may not be able to fill the vacuum for years. Ray Cline, former deputy director for intelligence, thinks that the "core of continuity has been destroyed. By and large, the historical memory is gone."

Foreign intelligence services, whose cooperation is essential, are bewildered and increasingly wary of dealing with a demoralized CIA keep secrets. Say happened to the U.S." Chaim He telligence, warns: the U.S. has des world. You can't agreement on bot has been occurri mine and demo their shoulders

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Much of their undercover work is far from glamorous and numbingly routine. "Nobody who works for the CIA is going to have a statue erected to him like the one to Nathan Hale," says Energy Secretary James Schlesinger, who served as CIA director for five months. Says James Angleton, former chief of counterintelligence at the CIA and now chairman of the Security and Intelligence Fund: "Our generation believed that you go in naked and you leave naked."

Analysis, which provides the basis for so many key decisions in American foreign policy, must be improved. At present, it is spotty: good in some areas, bad in others. A prominent consumer of CIA reports on Capitol Hill gives the agency an overall grade of C-minus. The agency gets pretty good marks for its reporting on Russia and China, and it feels it has stayed on top of developments in turbulent Central America. In Iran, on the other hand, it was embarrassingly inept. Says Birch Bayh, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence: "Technologically, it's unbelievable what we have the capacity to do. Our weakness is what we do with the information when we get it. We know the number of tanks belonging to the Warsaw Pact powers, but we want to know where they will go."

There is no substitute for the agent in the field to provide reporting on the intentions of foreign nations. "You can photograph and intercept all the messages that ultrasophisticated technology allows," says a West German expert. "But these cannot provide the sense of a place, the smell, sound and color that can tell so much." Because of declining morale and fear of leaks, CIA networks overseas have broken down. The agent who works abroad is often on his own. Says Jack Maury, onetime CIA chief of Soviet operations: "You can't just give orders from the top and expect them to be carried out. The real protection is integrity, not polygraphs and locks on the doors."

No less important is the analyst at headquarters who must make sense of copious, often conflicting information. He has to feel free to speak his mind, to dissent, to challenge. His independence needs to be safeguarded. Above all, he must have time to think. Caught up in a crisis, a President has a tendency to turn the agency into a kind of wire service to provide hour-by-hour commentary. This cuts down man-hours that should be